



resource room

## Red Squirrels



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IN COLLABORATION WITH  
JUNIPER ENGLISH

*Juniper is a science communicator and lifelong naturalist living in Victoria BC, the traditional territory of the ɫəkʷəŋən peoples, whose relationships with the land continue to this day.*

## Mushrooms and middens

**Looking for outdoor entertainment? Our sassy little Red squirrels (*Tamiasciurus hudsonicus*) can provide you with lots. Conifer seeds are their main food source and right now you can watch them leaping through BC's forests, gathering them like crazy. But did you know that they're also fans of fungi?**

That's right, these rodents are mad for mushrooms. Since many mushrooms fruit in the fall, our squirrels are now busy gathering them and air drying them for winter storage. Look up and around the forest in the fall and you might see their mushrooms laid out on sunny branches. Red squirrels been documented eating over 89 species of fungi, including those that are inedible or poisonous to humans.

They even sniff out truffles. Truffles are fungi that grow below ground. They rely on squirrels and other wildlife with powerful noses to smell the truffles and dig them out to eat. The truffle's spores pass through the diner and are spread far and wide. Look for shallow holes dug into banks below trees in the forest, especially after rain in the fall. You can often spot these diggings along trails.

Red squirrels are our native tree squirrels. They're about half the size of the invasive Eastern Grey squirrels found in urban areas of the province. Red squirrels are rusty-red with white bellies, bushy tails tipped with black hairs, tufted ears and a distinctive white eye-ring. They're diurnal (active during the day), generally solitary, and very territorial. They are often heard before they are seen, making a loud "tchrrrr!" while flicking their bushy tails from high in the trees, scolding and warning intruders and would-be mushroom thieves to go away.

### Squirrel snacks

Red squirrels will feed on grains, nuts, buds, berries, leaves, twigs, and cambium – the inner bark of trees. Being omnivorous, they will also occasionally eat insects, carrion, eggs, baby birds and rodents.

However, their preference is for spruce, pine and fir seeds — a gnawed cone is a sure sign of squirrels. They're cone-shuckers; quickly turning the cone with their long fingers while eating the seeds and dropping the scales, and then the cob, onto a trash heap "middens" at the base of their favourite coniferous trees. These middens pile up over the years into large hills. You can see holes in the middens where tunnels lead to their stores of food.



### Meet Cousin Doug

The Douglas squirrel (*Tamiasciurus douglasii*) is a relative of the Red squirrel. They are similar in appearance but have a reddish belly rather than white. The Douglas squirrel prefers old-growth or mature second-growth forest habitat. In BC they can be found in the southwestern corner of the province around Vancouver, along the Sunshine Coast, and on the islands of Howe Sound and Desolation Sound. In these areas the Red squirrel is not found.

### Danger in all directions

Red squirrels must be constantly on the alert for owls and hawks above, weasels, coyotes and lynx on the ground, and pine martens in the trees. Plus, they're always on the lookout for other squirrels invading their middens or territory. These may be other Red squirrels or the larger Eastern Grey squirrels.



Presently, we still have these boisterous native Red squirrels living wild throughout much of the province in coniferous and mixed forest habitats, from sea level to the subalpine. However, they prefer forest habitat and often move out of the area when urban development moves in, leading to population declines.

## Home sweet home

Red squirrels nest in cavities of trees and among dense branches. Squirrel nests are known as “dreys” and are made from any suitable material available including twigs, moss, shredded bark, pine needles, feathers, and leaves. These dreys are used for sleeping and raising young but unlike many other northern rodents, they are not used for hibernation.

Red squirrels are active all winter but go into a deep sleep called “torpor” when the temperature drops below  $-10^{\circ}\text{C}$ . They’ll curl up in their dreys until it warms up. It’s so fun to watch these squirrels while skiing or snowshoeing through the forest. Learn to identify their tracks on the snow and you might be able to guess what they’re doing.



## Squirrel spotting

Look for Red squirrels during quieter times of the day — mornings or later in the afternoon. Even better, stay overnight at a campsite and go Red squirrel spotting after all the other visitors have gone home. You can often watch, photograph or film them eating their “cones on the cob”. Often they’ll finish off their meal by grooming themselves — first their face, whiskers and paws, then the rest of their body and finally their tail gets a good cleaning, combing and fluffing. Enjoy!



## Innocent Invader?

The Eastern Grey squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) didn’t enter Red squirrel territory on their own, they had help. A small number were introduced into Vancouver’s Stanley Park in 1909, and subsequently multiplied. In 1966, several escaped from a game farm on Vancouver Island.

The Grey squirrel population has expanded from both areas and these squirrels can now be found in the lower Fraser Valley and the Okanagan as well. It is uncertain just how much impact they have on native flora and fauna like the Red squirrel, however they are considered a species of concern in Garry Oak ecosystems where they damage and kill trees by stripping the bark, and consume the acorns.

They also dig up lawns and garden beds, chew through electrical wires, nest in roofs, and attics, and damage fruit trees and other crops. To prevent the spread of Eastern Grey squirrels, please don’t feed or relocate them. Keep all compost and garbage covered, keep pet food inside, and use squirrel-proof bird feeders.

